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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out with a group of 98 female volunteers. The control group consisted of 27 who had not lost their fathers; the experimental group consisted of 71 who had lost their fathers due to death or divorce. All subjects were administered two checklists to measure personal adjustment and security. Results revealed that fatherless females whose mothers had not remarried demonstrated significantly greater insecurity and self-criticism than females from intact families. Neither reason for father loss nor age of daughter at time of separation were significant variables in this study. (Author/BP)

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IMPACT OF FATHER ABSENCE DURING CHILDHOOD ON COLLEGE AGE FEMALES' PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT

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Impact of Father Absence During Childhood on College Age Females' Psychological Adjustment

Previous research has demonstrated that boys raised without fathers during the pre-school years often demonstrate a marked inability to interact appropriately with other boys (Hetherington, 1966; Biller & Bahm, 1971). These disruptive effects in sex typing were found to subside, however, shortly after these fatherless boys began attending school. One conclusion has been that other boys served as substitutes for the male model the fatherless boys were lacking, and that the fatherless boys were able to adjust to the kinds of behaviors expected by their peers (Hetherington, 1972).

Fatherless girls, like fatherless boys, have been found to demonstrate inappropriate and/or over compensatory sex role feelings and behaviors. These feelings and behaviors, however, were not manifested until adolescence when the fatherless girls began to interact with boys. As reported by Hetherington (1972), girls showed greater disruption in their heterosexual activity if they had been separated from their fathers before age five. Furthermore, reason for separation from their fathers played a significant role in determining how these fatherless girls interacted with boys during adolescence. For instance, girls whose fathers had divorced their mothers tended to engage in behaviors in the form of impulsive approach and attention seeking behaviors, early heterosexual behaviors, and openness and responsiveness toward males. On the other hand, girls whose fathers had died tended to be more reflective and inhibited as well as showed more avoidance and restraint toward males (Hetherington, 1972).

The disruptions in heterosexual interactions described above were found in adolescent girls from 12 to 17 years old. The question remains whether the same deleterious effects are to be found in older fatherless females. It may be that, like males, females without fathers may learn to interact with more

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heterosexually appropriate feelings and behaviors since they have had more opportunities to interact with males than younger females.

In addition, the fatherless girls in Hetherington's (1972) study had no male figures living in the home since father loss. It is therefore of interest to determine if the mother's remarriage and the subsequent presence of a step-father would reduce some of the detrimental effects of the earlier father loss.

Method

Subjects

A total of 98 female volunteers, who ranged from 18 to 22 years of age, were selected from introductory psychology classes at Oklahoma State University to serve as subjects in this study. Of this 98, 27 were females who had not lost their fathers (control group), while the remaining 71 were females who either lost their father due to divorce or death and whose mothers either had or had not remarried.

Instrumentation

All 98 females were individually administered both the Adjective Checklist (ACL) developed by Gough (1952) and the Security-Insecurity (S-I) Inventory by Maslow (1952). The ACL was used in this study as a measure of well adjustment in terms of self criticism as indicated by the number of unfavorable adjectives checked regarding themselves. The S-I Inventory was also employed since its 75 items are purported to measure feelings of security.

Results and Discussion

Regarding personal adjustment, females who had lost fathers (regardless of cause) and whose mothers had not remarried checked significantly more unfavorable self-descriptive adjectives than females who had not lost fathers (father absence by divorce, $t = 2.49$, $df = 42$, $p < .01$; father absence by death, $t = 1.71$, $df = 41$, $p < .05$). Also, females who had lost fathers (regardless of reason) and whose mothers had not remarried tended to be significantly more insecure, as indicated

by their S-I scores, than females who had not lost fathers (father absence by divorce, $t = 1.77$, $df = 42$, $p < .05$; father absence by death, $t = 2.57$, $df = 41$, $p < .01$).

While females who had lost fathers and whose mothers had remarried tended to check more self-descriptive unfavorable adjectives and demonstrate lower scores on the S-I Inventory than the females who had not lost fathers, the differences between these two groups were not significant.

Regarding (1) the time of father absence, and (2) reason for separation from father, neither factor was found to have been significantly related with the females' level of adjustment or security.

These findings, noted above, indicate that substitutes (e.g., step-fathers) for fathers may serve to negate the effects of father separation on older females (i.e., 18-22 years of age) heterosexual feelings and behaviors, and that contrary to Hetherington's (1972) earlier findings, time of father absence and reason for father absence were not crucial variables in understanding older females' self concepts and feelings of security.

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